

# ARIYAKUDI RAMANUJA IYENGAR

---

Prof. V. V. Sadagopan

The Golden Jubilee of Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar's musical career was celebrated recently. Half a century, by all known standards, is a long period for a musician to maintain continued popularity. He is 76. Even if we exclude the first 10 years when he was rising in the profession, we have a period of forty years during which he has remained continuously at the top. His popularity is truly phenomenal; over many years he has been a major influence in the field of Karnatak Music. Two generations of musicians who came after him have adopted in varying degrees his techniques in music and concert-craft. The different styles of later musicians, almost all of them, have their roots in the tradition and style refined and propagated by him. The other major tradition belongs to Maharajapuram Visvanatha Iyer, another equally great performer.

The significance of Ariyakudi's art and life becomes clear as we take a historical perspective of things. At the dawn of the present century, there began a wave of enthusiasm for theoretical studies in Karnatak music. Much was made of the printed word and notation. Books were written in Telugu and Tamil, and the theory and rules of grammar put forward generally conflicted with one another and were often at variance with practice and yet were avidly swallowed by music-lovers and musicians at various levels of understanding. Among the latter those who took to the textual theories were not always first-rate exponents of the art. The main body of expert musicians, however, was concerned mainly with the execution of the art as such, and most of them were dedicated *nadopasakas*. The great Mahavaidyanatha Iyer had then departed from the scene, and the remaining outstanding figures were, to mention a few, Patnam Subramania Aiyer, Namakkal Narsimha Iyengar, Konerirajapuram Vaidvanatha Aiyer and Ramanathapuram Poochi Srinivas Iyengar among

vocalists (not to mention Pushpavanam Iyer who shone like a meteor) and Sarabha Sastri, Tirukkodikaval Krishna Iyer, Malaikkottai Govindaswami Pillai, Veena Dhanammal among instrumentalists. The finest of fine arts which defies all surface theory and rule-of-thumb grammar continued to be practised at the highest level by such masters. Iyengar was a gifted, impressionable young man when he came on the scene and he assimilated the essential spirit and technique, the *sampradaya*, of the art from the masters of the earlier generation. Unlike them, however, he faced a new time-spirit of expanding mass patronage and contracting scope for leisurely improvisation. This was at once an opportunity and a challenge.

### Early Life

Astrology and Ariyakudi seem to be linked together. When astrologer Tiruvenkatacharya of Ariyakudi read the horoscope of his third son, born on May 19, 1890, he found that a bright musical career was promised to the subject. Evidently he was a competent astrologer, for his infant son, Ramanuja, grew up to be a musician and became a phenomenon in the music world. Following the general practice in South India, the name of the village was prefixed to that of the musician, and that is how the little village of Ariyakudi, two miles from Karaikudi in Ramnad district, Andhra State, has been immortalised.

Tiruvenkatacharya was prosperous in his profession of astrology, which he practised as one in the eighth generation of a family known as Ariyakudi Josyars. He had also a fondness for music and was something of an amateur musician. He had friends in all circles of society and Pudukottai Malayappa Aiyar, the music teacher at Karaikudi, was one of them. So he put Ramanujam under the tutelage of his musician friend, in addition to sending him to school where the boy learnt Sanskrit, Tamil and arithmetic. Young Ramanujam had already begun to hum songs and *ragas* which he had heard around him in concerts of the best musicians of the day. Such events were not infrequent in that affluent part of Tamilnad called Chettinad. They were generally held on the occasions of marriages and during religious festivals. The *nagarattars*, otherwise known as *nattukkottai* Chettiars, are a business community. They lived a life of simplicity and spent a large portion of their wealth in public causes such as building temples, digging tanks and running schools and *dharmasalas*. Theirs is a barren country where one has to dig deep for water; where there is little or no vegetation and where rain-fall is scanty. They built palatial buildings, of which they themselves used just a corner and kept the major portion for the convenience of guests. Marriages and festivals were celebrated on a grand scale with performances of music, dance and *harikatha*-

*kalakshepam* for the benefit of invitees as well as for the general public. In the adjacent district of Tanjore, where the tradition of the musical Trinity of Karnatak music had saturated the atmosphere with music, there was music all round the year. In the Chettinad part of Ramnad District music did not overflow but there was just enough to whet the appetite.

Young Ramanujam had a rich melodious voice and it was natural for him to be asked to sing what little he knew. This was even before he went in for formal training under Malayappa Aiyer. The teacher was conscientious and painstaking, and he taught his pupil, in stages, all the lessons meant to impart mastery over the technique of the art of music—*svaravalis*, *jantavarisais*, *dhatuvarisais*, *alankarams*, *geetams*, *svarajatis* and *varnams*. He also taught him the compositions of Tyagaraja, Muthuswamy Dikshitar, Syama Shastri and others.

It is useful to know the discipline that Ramanuja Iyengar underwent as a student of music. When he was learning under Malayappier, he used to get up at 4 o'clock every morning and practise voice culture and scale exercises up to 7 o'clock. One can learn from Iyengar that the secret of good voice production lies in a complete relaxation of the body. Only then the tones come out rich with all the necessary overtones. Also, *akaras* and *svaras* are to be intoned in smooth curves, one proceeding from the other in a sort of natural consequence, adorned with appropriate *gamakas*. According to Iyengar the *gamaka*, *andolita* is characteristic of his *madhyamakala*. A couple of hours in the evening was devoted to the practice of songs learnt and also to adventures in *raga alapana*. All this was done to the accompaniment of *tambura sruti*. In addition, all through his waking hours he used to live, as he even now does, in the thought of *ragas* and *talas*, humming them all the time.

At the age of 16 he went in for higher studies at Srirangam under the renowned musician, Namakkal Narasimha Iyengar, compeer of Mahavaidyanatha Iyer and Patnam Subramania Iyer, known for his mastery in *pallavi-Romord*. Here too practice and voice culture continued. For unobtrusive and uninhibited *sadhana*, he used to go the thousand-pillared hall of the great Srirangam temple and spend hours on end. It was here, one may confidently say, that the foundations for the now-famous "Ariyakudi style" were laid. He did not do it alone. He had with him a sensitive companion and collaborator in Tirukkurungudi K. Shesha Iyengar (also known as Namakkal Sesha Iyengar), a senior pupil of Namakkal Narasimha Iyengar. The two became fast, life-long friends and together put in hours and days and months of experimentation in refinement of style and technique in the rendering of compositions as well as in

improvisation such as *raga alapana*, *niraval romord kalpana svara*. The thread was taken up later at Madras, and gradually a new style was evolved which had in it the essential elements of past traditions and also something new. It was a fusion of Namakkal Narasimha Iyengar, Poochi Iyengar, Tirukodikaval Krishna Iyer (violinist) and Dhanammal (veena)—combining strength, beauty and grace.

Namakkal Narasimha Iyengar was at that time gradually retiring from active participation on the concert-platform and it was considered that some years of being under-study to a younger concert musician of repute would give the aspiring concert musician Ramanuja Iyengar the necessary background. Poochi Srinivasa Iyengar, court musician of Ramnad, was perhaps the most popular concert musician of the time and he too was a friend of Ramanuja Iyengar's father. So, after two years at Srirangam, Ramanuja Iyengar joined Poochi Iyengar as a pupil. After a short period with the new master, he began giving concerts on his own, at festivals and even in *sabhas*. His *gurukulavasa* under Poochi Iyengar, however, continued, off and on, for nearly 12 years. Poochi Iyengar was not only a great musician but a scholar and composer of merit. Under him Ramanuja Iyengar learnt not only the traditional *kritis* of Tyagaraja, Muthuswamy Dikshitar, Shyama Shastri and other old classical composers, but also compositions of Poochi Iyengar. The *Atatala varna* in *Kanada*, the *kritis*, *Anudinamunu* in *Begada*, *Sadgurusvamiki* in *Ritigaula*, *Saraguna palimpa* in *Kedaragaula*, and many *Tillanas*, became popular largely through his renderings.

Poochi Iyengar, a man of high thought and action, was happy to see his pupil coming up in the profession (though, it is said, he had not had much hope of him earlier), and he actively encouraged him. Young Ramanuja Iyengar slowly but surely became a favourite with the patrons of Chettinad and elsewhere; yet he was a junior compared to his *guru*, Poochi Iyengar, and others. The first major break for him to establish himself as a musician of merit came on the occasion of a music festival organised in connection with a marriage in Al. Ar. Sm. Somasundaram Chettiar's in Kandanoor. A number of top-ranking musicians, singers and instrumentalists, had assembled there. Ramanuja Iyengar was also present along with his *guru*, Poochi Iyengar, as usual. The host, Somasundaram Chettiar, approached Poochi Iyengar and asked him in all courtesy, "Could you kindly permit our Ramanuja Iyengar to give a solo performance today?" The large-hearted *guru* gave his ready consent, and so it was that Ramanuja Iyengar had the first opportunity to sing in that august assembly of eminent musicians, such as Konerirajapuram Vaidyanatha Iyer, Tirukkodikaval Krishna Iyer, Kumbakonam Alaganambi

Pillai, Ghatam Krishna Iyer and Pudukottai Dikshinamurti Pillai, the senior accompanists themselves playing for his performance. The performance was an immediate success. Not only the connoisseurs and laymen but also the masters present were immensely satisfied and pleased. His *guru* blessed him saying: "You are now fully qualified to launch your profession on your own. May God bless you!"

Ramanuja Iyenger derives nostalgic delight from the thought of his student days. Talking of tradition, I pointed out how none of his ancestors had specialised in music and music was not his family tradition. "It is true, of course, but vocal music does not require a family tradition," says Ariyakudi. "It may be an advantage in the case of instruments like the *veena*. The voice is a god-given natural instrument and it is only by *poorvajanmasukrita* that one develops a good voice, aptitude in music and opportunity to learn from great masters; '*Sitavara, sangita, jnanamu Dhata vrayavalera*'. One thing, however, should be noted: During the period of maturity, i.e. between the ages of 15 and 19, boys should put in incessant practice. It is only through this that one can retain the voice after the change, or break, as they call it. Seshanna (Sesha Iyengar) and I used to practise for hours and hours during those days at Srirangam. But", he added, "practice lessons should not be flaunted on the concert platform. Even singing *varnas* in two degrees of speed is not necessary or desirable at all concerts, but perhaps they may be permitted in performances to select audiences. This kind of technique is meant more for practice, to gain control over *sruti, laya* and *raga-bhava*."

"Did you practice, in those days, *tisra gati* in *varnas* as they now-adays do?" "Oh, no, these things distract the student from *laya-suddha* in *chaturasra gati* which is the fundamental basis of all *tala*."

### Career

In the second decade of the century, Ramanuja Iyengar rose steadily in the profession, and was in demand for concerts in every part of the country. By the early twenties, he was acknowledged as a musician of outstanding ability. The hall-mark was obtained when people dropped his main name and referred to him simply as "Iyengar" or as "Ariyakudi". In 1923 he substituted for his *guru* Poochi Iyengar in the famous Tiruvaiyyaru festival of Saint Tyagaraja and his performance was a remarkable success. That was perhaps the performance which placed him beyond doubt in the top rank of musicians. From that time onwards he has not looked back.

Those were the times of truly knowledgeable patrons and connoisseurs. They and the lay public listened with an attitude of reverence and with an open mind to receive good music from wherever it came. Things,

however, were changing. The city of Madras was gradually taking over the cultural lead from Tanjore. Many *sangita sabhas* had sprung up, and admissions by tickets, some exclusive to members, some open to buyers of casual tickets, were becoming the order of the day. Some 30 years earlier, it is interesting to recall, commercialisation of the divine art of music had been frowned upon. A *sabha* had arranged a concert by Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer. When the saintly musician arrived at Madras on the day of the performance and saw wall-posters announcing his performance and giving details of the rates of admission, he was shocked and scandalised. He called the organisers of the *sabha* and asked them: "What is this? Is my music for sale? Please throw it open to all lovers of music." The latter had perforce to yield to the wish of the master. Musicians were paid, of course, but through what could be described as voluntary token of homage.

There were acknowledged connoisseurs of music who shaped the public taste, such as W. Duraiswamy Iyengar of Madras. There was also the veteran scholar and *Harikatha* performer, educator and fearless critic, Kirtanacharya C. R. Srinivasa Iyenger, who was a power to reckon with. Ariyakudi's music was not only approved but greatly enjoyed by such connoisseurs and critics. I recall a revealing remark made by the grand old man of those days, composer Kotiswara Iyer: "I have heard the best musicians of the past, and am listening to many of this generation. As you know, I am myself something of a musician and composer, thanks to my grandfather Kavikunjara Bharati. It is only Ramanujam's music which I am able to approve of fully."

The crux of the matter was that Ramanuja Iyengar's concert pattern, though new and meant to suit the changing times, was firmly rooted in the past tradition and represented its best elements. *Ragabhava*, *gamaka* and *laya* are his *forte*. He set a brisk pace to music on the platform. He sang compositions with a statuesque finish. When heard they are deceptively easy, but when attempted, they are found difficult for the singer who has no deep understanding of *gamaka* and *ragabhava*. The same is true of his *raga alapana*, *niraval* and *kalpana svara*. The previous age had more leisure than the age in which he found himself. As an intuitive artist and a clever craftsman, he realized that flights of artistic fancy alone would not do for the musical platform. He set about analysing the *panditaranjaka* and *pamararanjaka* aspects of music and assembled, so to say, all those aspects which had an appeal to both sections. It would be interesting to note that in those days the layman, and even the connoisseur to some extent, was waiting eagerly for the latter part of his performance when he would give his delightful *tukkadas* (light pieces). *Mangapalundu*, a philosophical

song of one the Tamil mystics known as Kudambai Siddhar, was a vehicle chosen by him to captivate the masses. The text of the song was simple and even humorous, and the tune was a stylised form of the popular folk melody called *temmangu*. People would wait patiently and respectfully through his earlier classical renderings in the first part of a concert and go into ecstasies when such light songs came from the master. There were many encores and Ramanuja Iyengar would gladly respond. Thus by the promise of romantic music at the end, audiences were trained to enjoy sophisticated classical music in the earlier part.

Talking of encores, I must say how they were made not infrequently in respect of classical compositions also during many of his performances. His deliberate planning and preparation of not only compositions but also improvisations have stood him in good stead, indeed, in this regard. I distinctly remember how in the midst of pouring rain outside, in one of those delightful night performances in Tirunelveli district, Iyengar successfully responded to encores of *Everi Mata* in *Kambhoji* twice—complete with *alapana*, *kriti* and *kalpana svara*.

Innumerable have been the compositions popularised by him in the course of half a century. Among them are : *Evai mata* in *Kambhoji*, *Dinamani vamsa* in *Harikambhoji*, *Koti nadulu* in *Todi*, *Kamalambam* in *Kalyani*, *Venkatasailla* in *Hamirkalyani*, *Koluvaiyunnade* in *Bhairavi*, *Endukupeddala* in *Sankarabharanam*, *Yelavatara* in *Mukhari*, *Chakkani* in *Khara-harapriya*, *Alakalallada* in *Madhyamavati*, *Anupama* in *Atana*, *Sukhi Yevvaro* in *Kanada*, *Paramapavana* in *Purvakalyani*, *Saraguna palimpa* in *Kedara-gaula*, *Sadgurusvamiki* in *Ritigaula*, *Manasa guruguha* in *Anandabhairavi* and so on. His interpretation of *kritis* such as *Amba nannu*, *Sri Venkatesam* and *Dasarathi* in *Todi* and *Sri Subrahmanyaya* in *Kambhoji*, have a soul-stirring quality and the stamp of individuality.

Once a piece was sung by Ramanuja Iyengar, it became the rage with the people at concerts as well as in their homes. *Kartikeya gangeya* of Papanasam Sivan, *Sri Chamundesvari* of Mysore Vasudevachar, and many such compositions of modern composers were popularised in Tamilnad through him. *Javalis* like *Kommarovaniki* and *Maru bari* also owed their popularity to Iyengar. Some of the Hindustani *ragas* sung towards the close of his concerts took on a Karnatak aspect and became something new and delectable through his technique. *Tiruchenduran Sivakumaran* and *Vaishnava Janato* in *Sindhu Bhairavi* are airs still fondly cherished by music lovers who heard him then.

When, in the early thirties, classical music came into its own in the matter of public patronage, the gramophone companies wanted to record

some of the top-ranking classical musicians. Earlier there had not been many such gramophone records because, for one thing, there were doubts if these would be a sound commercial proposition and secondly, the musicians themselves were averse to having anything to do with mechanical reproductions. Some feared that they would lose the concert market. Some even believed that the recording machine would 'absorb' their voices and so they would lose them. A similar belief had been held in regard to photography some years before. Ramanuja Iyengar was one of the earliest in his class to break from orthodoxy in this respect and he recorded a few songs for the Columbia Gramophone Company. His rendering of the *kriti*, *Evai mata in Kambhoji* and *ragamalika vrittam, Talavukattam* made a profound impression on people and are even today prized as treasures by music-lovers. Part of the credit for recording him must go to the 'Swadesamitran' (daily newspaper) organisation, headed by C. R. Srinivasan, which was celebrating its Golden Jubilee. Ramanuja Iyengar composed a song to commemorate the occasion and recorded it: *Sundaramana Sudesamitran* was the first gramophone record by Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar.

In the orthodox fashion befitting a *vaishnav* family of those days, Ramanuja Iyengar was married at the age of 19 to Ponnammal *alias* Tangammal at about the time he entered *gurukulavasa* under Poochi Iyengar. But household life began only after he had completed the major part of his studentship. The couple had two daughters who, in due course, were married to young men within their own circle of relations. Domestic life was taken in the stride; professional, artistic and social interests claimed Iyengar's major attention.

In the early years of his profession Ariyakudi and Karaikudi were his headquarters. Later he built a house in Kumbakonam in Tanjore district, and since then Kumbakonam has been his headquarters as being more convenient from the point of view of both his professional tours and accessibility to his devoted students.

Ramanuja Iyengar's career as a musician is an unbroken record of success. On a modest estimate, he has given 2,000 to 3,000 concerts. He performed in *sabhas*, festivals, palaces and temples. There were times when he gave two concerts in a single day. Top-ranking accompanists belonging to 3 generations have accompanied him. In the earlier days, Malaikkottai Govindaswami Pillai (who blazed a new trail in violin play) accompanied him often. Others of the generation who played the violin for him were Karur Chinnaswami Iyer, Marungapuri Gopalakrishna Iyer, Madras Balakrishna Iyer and Semmangudi Narayana-



swami Iyer, to mention a few. Violinists of the next generation, such as Kumbakonam Rajamanickam Pillai, Mysore T. Chowdiah and Papa Venkataramaiya were among those who usually accompanied him. To the younger generation belong T. N. Krishnan and Lalgudi Jayaraman. On the *mridangam* of the earlier generation, Kumbakonam Alaganambi Pillai and Pudukkottai Dakshinamurti Pillai and later, Tanjore Ramadas Rao, Tanjore Vaidyanatha Iyer, Umayalpuram Kodandarama Iyer, Rengu Iyengar, Madras Venu Naicker and others have accompanied him. The gifted Palghat Mani Iyer rose about the same time and he played, and continues to play, at all important concerts of Iyengar.

Though by virtue of his position in the profession Iyengar has generally been given the best accompanists of the day, not infrequently he would find himself faced with indifferent and even bad accompanists. But he would not refuse any accompanist an opportunity to play along with him. On such occasions, instead of allowing the performance to flag, he would take all the burden upon himself, cheer the accompanist and steer the performance through to success.

The Tyagaraja Aradhana festival at Tiruvaiyaru without Ariyakudi is unthinkable. His association with the festival of the saint-composer has been continuous and uninterrupted over the years, irrespective of changing affiliations and complexions of the organisation conducting the festival. His rendering of the *pancharatna kritis*, of *Sadhinchene* in *Arabhi raga* and *Endaro Mahanubhavulu* in *Sriraga*, on the morning of the *aradhana* day came to be, and continues to be, eagerly looked forward to by *rasikas* on the spot and over the radio by listeners all over the country. The verve which he puts into the songs is truly characteristic of the man and his style.

A major factor which helped him greatly in his rise to fame and long sustained success, is the character of his voice. It has a distinct beauty of its own. He had his difficulties with it in the beginning, but the way he has trained it and the manner in which he produces *nada* from the depths of the diaphragm, or *nabhi* (navel), without seeming to do so, and his delightful variations of volume and stress, all these contribute to an elegance which is deceptively simple and difficult to achieve. A slight huskiness adds sensuous charm to his voice which is sonorous with rich overtones.

He is also a composer of no mean merit. He has a flair for composing music to existing texts. There are also full compositions containing his own texts, a *tillana* in *Bilahari* being one of them.

He has set to music of his own, many songs whose musical structure had either been lost or could be improved. To the former category belongs the *Tiruppavai* of Andal, a set of 30 songs which have a deeply religious and poetic fervour, and which are now known throughout South India to the tunes set by Ariyakudi. Among the songs of which the music was improved by Iyengar may be mentioned some of the *Ramanataka kirtanas* of Arunachalakavi. *Yaro ivar yaro* in *Bhairavi* is an outstanding instance.

Years ago, many years before the Tamil Isai movement started, it was Iyengar who gave to Tamil compositions their rightful place in the pre-*pallavi* part of the concert. He sang old compositions of Arunachalakavi, Gopalakrishna Bharati and Mutthutandavar and others. His unbiased mind could perceive the musical worth of songs of the modern composer, Papanasam Sivan. He is also a good teacher. As he himself learnt compositions from various sources, he believes in teaching them not only to his own accredited pupils but to any student of music who goes to him with sincerity. His formal and accredited students are many, spread over many generations. In the early years, his own brother Raghava Iyengar and Atmanatha Iyer, Ganesa Iyer, Vanajakshi, Aparanji, Alamelu Jayarama Iyer, M. S. Soundaram and many others learnt from him. Then there are Devakottai Seenu, Melattore Subbier, R. Ramaswami, K. S. Dhanammal, M. Y. Gopalswami Iyengar, K. S. Rajam Iyengar, Puduvayal Kunjaramier, Kanadukathan Krishnamurthy, Alleppey Papa, V. C. Vaidyanathan, B. Rajam Iyer, K. V. Narayanaswami, Madurai Krishnan, Kuppuswami, Raghavan, Kandadevi Narayanan, Melattore Rajagopalan, Vedavyasa Rao, Venkatapathi, Pratapam Natesan, Venkataraman, N. R. Srinivasan, S. Sampath, and the present writer. Many of these ably practise the profession of teaching while some other are well-known performers. This is by no means a complete list. There are many other *Ekalaiva sishyas*.

The honours that came to him were many. In 1932 there was a unique function held under the auspices of the Sangeeta Sabha at Vellore in North Arcot district. Musicians, music-lovers, connoisseurs and critics had assembled there to honour Ramanuja Iyengar who was by then a name to conjure with in all cultural circles of South India. The occasion was unique in that it was perhaps the first time that the fact of the shift of patronage of music from private to public hands was demonstrated in such a convincing manner. The conferring of titles and honours had, upto then, been the virtual monopoly of the princes and the aristocracy. Here were, for the first time, public groups honouring an artiste and conferring a title on him. Kirtanacharya C. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, musician,

critic and connoisseur, much revered for his taste and integrity, presided over the function and the title of *Sangita Ratnakara* (ocean of music) was conferred on Ramanuja Iyengar. This title is valued very highly by Iyengar even to this day, after he has received many more titles at the hands of Maharajas, Music Societies and the State, for it was given to him at a time when public titles had not become as common as they are today. Presiding over the Madras Music Academy in 1938, he was awarded the *Sangita Kalanidhi*. The Maharaja of Mysore made him his *Asthana Vidwan* and conferred the title of *Gayakasikhamni* on him. When the Government of India instituted, in 1952, annual honours to musicians, Iyengar was the natural first choice in the field of Karnatak Vocal Music. When All India Radio started the National Programme of Music in 1954, it was Iyengar whom they invited first from the Karnatak Music tradition.

Other honours and titles received by him are: *Sangita Kala Sikhamani* from the Indian Fine Arts Society in 1947; *Isai Perarijnar* from Tamil Isai Sangam in 1960; and *Sangita Sastra Alankara* from His Holiness Sri Sankaracharya of Sringeri. He is a *Padma Bhooshan* and a Fellow of the Sangeet Natak Akademi. Currently he is Honorary Principal of the Tamil Isai Kalloori, Madras.

### Personal Traits

Of medium height, build and complexion, thoughtful eyes and well-chiselled features, Iyengar is the picture of repose and self-confidence. The tufted hair on his head, the Vaishnavite *namam* on his forehead, and diamond rings on the ear-lobes and on the fingers, all these proclaim the generation and the profession to which he belongs. The bracelet (*toda*) on his right hand, the insignia of distinguished musicianship, covers a talisman which is the insignia of faith. On his left hand he wears a coral reed for reasons of health. The only concession to modernism is a wrist watch, for he is punctual in keeping his engagements. Simple in attire, he nevertheless sports the *jarigai dupatta* (laced upper cloth) which is invariably associated with the musician and the connoisseur of the older generation. The dhoti is generally worn in *panchakacha* style and his favourite in shirts is the one with full sleeves; coat, only when ceremony calls for it.

In a musician of his outstanding attainments, his humility and unassuming nature, shorn of all pretensions, is truly amazing. One rarely hears him talk of himself. Likewise, it is difficult to point out any occasion when he used uncomplimentary words about any musician. His courtesy and cordiality are characteristic. Off the concert platform (and very occa-

sionally on the platform too) he strikes a harmless humorous note. He is an adept at punning on words, and his fondness for the *double entendre* is well known. His humour falling under this class, depending as it does on verbal peculiarities of the Tamil language is not easily communicable in another language.

It is impossible to upset him at any time. Even when someone in the audience shows a lack of decorum, indulging in whispers with his neighbour, Iyengar has a knack of admonishing without wounding. "One should know things oneself, or at least listen to the advice of those who know"; "What is one to do with people who will not learn even after endless repetition?"—these are the opening lines of songs which he sings to great advantage on such occasions !

Sitting on a swing and slowly swinging is his favourite mode of relaxation. He is cool and calculating in business, prompt and methodical in correspondence, polite in the extreme. Beneath the self-confident, masterly appearance of the artiste is the spirit of the humble student ever conscious of the immensity of his art, pious and thoughtful of Tyagaraja all his waking hours. Above all, the Divine Lord Shri Rama occupies his mind at the substratum of all his thoughts and actions.

For all his fame and fortune he is levelheaded and does not assume airs or flaunt his wealth and position. He is prudent and thrifty. Withal, he is a good host and it is only here that one can see his kindness and consideration at their best. He has nothing but warmth and friendliness towards others. Intimate friends as such, however, he has very few. He has a prodigious memory. In the course of over half-a-century of practice on the concert platform he has acquired a large circle of friends and acquaintances and admirers, and he evidently remembers or seems to remember the name and circumstance of each one of them.

The constant travel imposed on him by a successful career does not seem to put any undue strain on him even at this advanced age. He has a sound body and a sound mind. Balance and proportion which mark his music, mark his habits as well. His life is smooth and uneventful. His daily routine consists of ablutions, prayer and music in an endless cycle. No wonder, for he comes of the *sisya parampara* of Tyagaraja—in two was. Poochi Iyengar's *guru*, Patnam Subramanya Iyer, studied under Manambuchvadi Venkatasubbier who was a direct disciple of Tyagaraja. Namakkal Narasimha Iyengar, too, was with Manambuchavadi Venkatasubbier for some time, though this is not known to many.

### Art and Technique

The apparent ease of his art has a long story of assiduous practice on correct lines, determining the proportion of each song, its tempo and refinement. *Sangatis*, or built-in variations in compositions play an important part in Karnatak Music, but it is only the great artist who does not allow himself to overdo this aspect. His rendering of compositions are a model of balance and finish.

This sense of the appropriate may be said to be the key-note of Iyengar's art. The beginning of the large-scale democratic patronage of art was also the beginning of a change from the leisurely ways of the old. The hour found the man in Ramanuja Iyengar. Carrying the torch of tradition at its best, he has yet managed to give it a distinct touch of modernity which happily blends with the past. He does not allow technique to be overbearing nor does he flaunt his skill to the detriment of aesthetic values. His technique and skill are unobtrusive and, in a way, deceptively easy to the superficial observer. There are people who regret, with some justification, that such a great artist does not lose himself in his art. But that is Iyengar. To him discretion is the better part of artistry. His love of success through proved craftsmanship is too strong to permit him the luxury of losing himself before the public. This is the general rule, but there have been exceptions.

Success is always assured to him, because of the calculated way in which he proceeds. There are only degrees in his success. He is a man least given to moods, which are so invariably associated with the artist. Is there anything that he specially does to keep his voice in condition? Any special food or medicine? No, he just leads a simple, normal life. His sense of balance and proportion, so characteristic of his art, guides him here also. He is moderate in eating and sleeping. There is a belief that buttermilk is not good for the voice. Iyengar has proved it a superstition. Not only does he drink buttermilk but, strange as it might appear, he does not, as a rule, drink milk which is supposed to be good for the voice! With the growing years, his voice has acquired increasing depth and mellowness. He has also changed his technique of presentation in such a way that change is scarcely perceptible. Regrettably, however, he has to some extent fallen in line with the mechanistic trends of "*Tadhiginatam*" which he used to deprecate.

Eminent contemporary musicians have said of his art :

"He has been the *Sangitha Dharma Paripalaka* for so many decades by fostering with genuine care, real interest and innate strength, *Karnataka Sampradaya*. It is the duty—the best and the most effective tribute to

his services for our music—of musicians and listeners to adopt in principle and encourage the establishment and growth of the musical culture and tradition he has so assiduously, and for so long, built up,”—the late G. N. B.

Dwaram Venkataswami Naidu, the celebrated violinist :

“The fine characteristics of Ariyakudi’s music are his beautiful portrayal of the *raga*, the *pathantara suddham* of *kirtanas* and the well-proportioned *niraval* and *kalpana svaras*. Even though Ariyakudi devotes a few minutes to a *raga alapana*, it is replete with all the *lakshanas* of that particular *raga*. Ariyakudi is shrewd in anticipating the wishes of the audience, and arranges the choice and sequence of *kirtanas* accordingly. On some occasions Ariyakudi’s voice may be affected by climatic changes, but he possesses the intrinsic quality of choosing such of those *kirtanas* as suit his voice. Ariyakudi’s *adhara sruti* has been a bit low during the past decade. But his voice reaches even the *panchamam* of the *mandra sthayi sancharams*. When Ariyakudi sings such *kirtanas*, you feel the richness of his voice.

“There are critics who style Ariyakudi’s music as stereotyped. But, it should be remembered that every musician develops a style of his own and if he is able to maintain that style consistently, it is to the credit of that musician.”

Palghat Mani Iyer, known for his reticence :

“The chief characteristic of Sri Iyengar’s music is a sense of proportion, that is, determining and following a balanced plan.”

Iyengar himself has said :

“For pleasant effect, I feel that a programme should be well balanced in its components. Each melodic phrase, whether in free-moving *alapana* or in a composition, should carry the salient features and, above all, the *rakti* and the sentiment of the *raga*, and the technique should not override the aesthetics. The phrases should be well balanced and the whole scheme should have a poise and beauty, for which a sound knowledge of the *graha*, *amsa* and such pivotal notes and the exact place and proportion in the application of the various types of graces is indispensable. The whole scheme should be like a painting, in which each stroke, and spot, however colourful individually, will contribute to a pleasant picture as a composite whole . . .

“Like my *guru*, I have never begun a concert without singing a *varna* at the commencement. It imparts mellowness to the voice and a

flavour to the subsequent rendering of *kritis* or *ragas*. Palghat Anatarama Bhagyatar and Bidaram Krishnappa began their concerts with *tana varnas*. In the past (pre-*varna* days), performers used to sing *tanas* in the *Nattai*, *Gahla*, *Arabi*, *Varali* and *Sri ragas*, to the accompaniment of the mridangam. . .

“A performer must be deeply conscious of his strength and weakness. In effect the performance should be such as to keep the listeners spell-bound, making them stay on to the very end, thirsting for still more.”

What was his preference in regard to *anuloma*, *pratiloma* in *pallavi* singing? The old method of beginning from the *padagarbha*, or the new method of beginning on the *graha* or *eduppu*? “Of course, the old method is more aesthetic. As you know, I can do both; but very seldom do I indulge in either of these at all. After all, the main charm of a *pallavi* lies in elaborating it with complete *manodharma* in *niraval* and *svara*. It is really a pity that this aspect is receiving less and less attention now-a-days.”

What does he do when there is difference of opinion with regard to the grammar of a *raga*, say, whether it is *suddha* or *chatusruti dhaivata* in a *raga* like *Saramati*? “I sing according to my *pathantara*, but I can also please the protagonists of the new grammar by singing the *raga* or the piece according to their own *lakshana*. Don’t you remember I sang *Mokshamugalada* in this very *raga* in two versions, once, in the Music Academy Conference?”

His rendering of compositions with a neat finish has been alluded to. In *raga alapana*, apart from the major *ragas*—*Todi* and *Kambhoji* in particular—the *rakti ragas* which he handles with telling effect are the traditional ones like *Saveri*, *Varali* and *Sahana*. He has no use for outlandish excursions in scale, misnamed *apoorva* (rare) *ragas*. The only *apoorva ragas* he would permit himself are the traditional ones which are both *ragas* (capable of *rakti*) and rare—such as *Ahiri*, *Kannada*, *Asaveri*.

To *neraval*, *pallavi* and *kalpana svara* he imparts a lilt which is not divorced from dignity. In its art aspect *laya vinyasa* is based on the principles of *prastara*, *alankara* and *yati*. Underscoring the first and emphasising the other two in judicious proportions is the distinguishing characteristic of his style.

### His Contribution

To understand the contribution of Iyengar to Karnatak Music, we must turn to the historical background. As pointed out, there were two factors which were emerging in the cultural life of South India in the

early years of the century. One was the spirit of impatience and hurry characteristic of the machine-age, which we are witnessing in an increasing measure today. The other was the publication of books on music. Not all the books that were published were by practical exponents of the art.

Artists like Iyengar and a few others of this generation, however, withstood the temptation of arbitrary music. They were content to draw on the education they had had from their *gurus* and to develop their own intuitive faculties of interpreting the art. Iyengar in particular, had the models of great veterans whom he had heard and learnt from and did not depart from the highest *sampradaya* which was enshrined in the different styles of the masters who had preceded him. *Gamaka*, which gives characteristic flavour to Karnatak Music, and its *ragas*, became his field of specialisation and he used it to the best advantage in creating a style of his own. In *tala*, the mechanical permutation and combination of *svaras* in much-too-predetermined rhythmic patterns did not hold any attraction for him. Instead he devoted himself wholly to the time-honoured tradition of going in for a natural flow of rhythm, *sarvalaghu*, with its emphasis on *raga bhava* and *gamaka*. He and Sesha Iyengar had earlier tried their hand at the new-fangled *korvai* and *tadhginatom* involving an excessive pre-determination and mechanisation of rhythmic phrasing but had given them up as unsuitable from the aesthetic point of view. In rhythmic improvisation, therefore, Ramanuja Iyengar employed a happy combination of the elements of *prastara*, *alankara* and *yati*. The last-mentioned technique, *yati*, which consists of phrases of gradually increasing or decreasing dimensions, is a noteworthy feature in his style of *svara* singing.

Then there was the psychological factor which concerned the age of speed in which he found himself. He struck a balance between the leisurely ways of old and the hurrying pace of modern times. That is how his famous *mahdyamakala* or medium tempo came into being. Even in compositions set in *vilambakala*, he saw to it that adequate representation to *mahyamakala sangati* was given. In *raga* elaboration too, *madhyamakala sancharas* were judiciously mixed with those in *vilambakala*. In his younger days when his voice would permit it, he set *trikala saugatis* also in the midst of *madhyamakala* phrases. Even in the tempo of his *madhyamakala*, he has gradually and imperceptibly slowed down in the course of the years to suit his capacity.

The change in outlook which set in about the twenties of the century can be exemplified by a comparison with the changing taste for the short story in preference to the novel. The concert platform too had to fall in line with the new trend, and Ramanuja Iyengar may be said to



be the chief architect of what may be called the "short story pattern" of concert music. Concerts before his time were leisurely and long-winded—the musician practising *nadopasana* on the platform and the audience listening with deep respect and endeavouring to identify themselves with the musician, and ready to be transported to another world. Later audiences were composed of different types of people—those who came into the music hall for spiritual exaltation, those who sought entertainment, and others who went there just out of curiosity or fashion. To hold the interest of an assembly of such diverse tastes and capacities, it required not only an artiste and *nadopasaka* but a master who knew his craft. Ramanuja Iyengar filled this need in an ample measure, and that is how he has held the field of concert music for over half a century. Without swerving from the essentials of *sampradaya* he has managed to cater to the needs of all kinds of audiences.

While the masters of the earlier generation used to confine their specialisation to a few *ragas* and a few well-known compositions in them, Ramanuja Iyengar found that that would not do for the present age which craved for variety. Though in the matter of *ragas* he was usually content with expounding the traditional known ones, he was ever conscious of the need to give a rich variety in compositions. He, therefore, learnt all good compositions that came his way, not only from his own *gurus*, but also from other musicians of his generation and even from younger musicians. He continues to learn even today. He has thus kept himself abreast of the times and made the concert platform lively and full of interest. The present day concert platform is largely fashioned by him, though his *guru*, Poochi Iyengar, is said to have made a beginning in the direction.

The major contribution of Ramanuja Iyengar to Karnatak Music, therefore, is the demonstration that *sampradaya* in its best sense is something organic and dynamic. The successful musician is he who has his feet firmly planted on the soil of the musical wisdom of the past and stretches his hands to receive all new ideas which can be happily blended with the old. Iyengar is a great living link in the continuing tradition of Karnatak Music.

Iyengar's art is at once traditional and modern. It has stood the test of time. Not only has he adapted himself to the times, but has succeeded remarkably in shaping the taste of the public. He has helped preserve the essential values of Karnatak music—its *gamakas*, in particular, which are an artistic necessity in the feeling for pleasant musical 'intervals' as distinguished from 'note-positions'. He is a great reconciler; reconciling the past and the present; tradition and innovation; abandon and deliberation.

## NOTES

## Musical Terms

<i>Adhara sruti</i>	Drone or tonic
<i>Alankara</i>	Tonal motifs
<i>Amsa</i>	The focal <i>swara</i> of a <i>raga</i>
<i>Anuloma</i>	A technique in <i>pallavi</i> singing ; refers to doubling and quadrupling the tempo of the text of a composition
<i>Akara</i>	The main vowel 'A' used in vocal exercises
<i>Andolita</i>	A swing-like type of <i>gamaka</i>
<i>Asthana vidwan</i>	Court musician
<i>Chatursruti dhaivata</i>	Natural sixth ; one-tone interval from the fifth
<i>Datu varisai</i>	Transilient motifs
<i>Eduppu</i>	Starting point of a song in the rhythmic cycle
<i>Ekalaiva sishya</i>	Disciple who learns only by meditation on the <i>guru</i> without the physical presence of the latter. A term based on the legend of Ekalaiva
<i>Gamaka</i>	Expressive grace of a <i>swara</i>
<i>Graha</i>	Starting note in a <i>raga</i> structure
<i>Gitam</i>	Elementary form of musical composition
<i>Gurukulavasa</i>	The traditional way in which the pupil learnt directly from the master, living with him
<i>Harikathakalakshepam</i>	Musical discourse generally centered around a <i>puranic</i> theme
<i>Janta varisai</i>	Double-note motifs
<i>Korvai</i>	A pre-meditated, arithmetically conceived pattern of rhythm
<i>Kalpana svaram</i>	Improvised singing of "sol-fa"
<i>Kriti</i>	Prevalent form of composition, which though having words, is characterised by its dominant musical quality. Usually it is in three sections
<i>Lakshana</i>	A definitive characteristic
<i>Layavinyasa</i>	Rhythmic elaboration
<i>Laya</i>	Tempo
<i>Laya suddha</i>	Adherence to the chosen tempo
<i>Mandra sthayi sancharam</i>	Elaboration in the lower octave

<i>Manodharma</i>	Creative imagination
<i>Madhyama kala</i>	Medium tempo
<i>Niraval</i>	Melodic-rhythmic improvisation on the text of a song
<i>Nadopasana</i>	Meditating on the primal sound through music
<i>Pada garbha</i>	The rhythmic-melodic focus of a <i>pallavi</i>
<i>Prastara</i>	Permutation of notes
<i>Pathantara suddham</i>	Purity in traditional form of a composition
<i>Panchamam</i>	The fifth
<i>Pratiloma</i>	A technique in <i>pallavi singing</i> ; refers to doubling and quadrupling of the tempo of rhythm
<i>Pushti</i>	Richness, fullness
<i>Pallavi</i>	The most sophisticated form and style in Karnatak Music, of improvisation in <i>raga</i> , <i>tala</i> and text
<i>Purvajanma sukrita</i>	Merit acquired in previous births
<i>Rakti</i>	Aesthetic pleasure
<i>Raga alapana</i>	Exposition of <i>raga</i> with internal temporal proportion but bereft of obvious external rhythm
<i>Raga bhava</i>	The ethos of a <i>raga</i>
<i>Suddha dhaivata</i>	Minor sixth ; semi-tone interval from the fifth
<i>Sahitya</i>	Textual part of a song
<i>Sampradaya</i>	Tradition
<i>Sangatis</i>	Traditional variations of a melodic line
<i>Sanchara</i>	Melodic phrasing
<i>Svaravali</i>	Primary solfa motifs for exercise in Karnatak Music
<i>Svarajati</i>	A secondary form of musical composition employing words and melodic as well as rhythmic "solfa" syllables. There are advanced compositions too in this type
<i>Svara</i>	Loosely translated as 'note' or 'tone', it means a melodic interval with reference to the tonic
<i>Sruti</i>	Used here to mean the drone
<i>Sadhakam</i>	Practice

<i>Sabha</i>	Music circle or society
<i>Tadhiginatam</i>	Pre-meditated, arithmetically conceived patterns of rhythm
<i>Tillana</i>	Composition wherein melodic and rhythmic syllables occur along with words, usually in medium tempo
<i>Tana varna</i>	See <i>Varnam</i>
<i>Tri kala</i>	Third degree of speed in which syllables are quadrupled within a given unit of time.
<i>Tisragati</i>	Bar of 3 rhythmic units
<i>Varnam</i>	Here refers to <i>tana varnam</i> which marks the stage between practice and exposition. This type of composition brims with melodic beauties of <i>raga</i> and rhythmic beauties of <i>tala</i>
<i>Yati</i>	Rhythmic design wherein phrases occur either in increasing or decreasing order of their temporal length

---

*Prof. V. V. Sadagopan a distinguished musician and teacher was Professor of Karnatak Music at the Delhi University. A first class mathematics graduate he learnt advanced music from Tirukurungudi K. Sesha Iyenger and Ariyakudi T. Ramanuja Iyenger. A composer whose signature is "Seshadasa", the music score "Geetamala" was by him. He has also written on the folk dances of Tamilnad. His fundamental research in music has led him to new experiments in musical education of children. His papers include, Psychology of Listening, Voice Culture, Reorientation of Musicological Studies, Music for All, etc. Currently he is Director of "Tyaga-Bharati" Madras and Delhi and Editor of "Indian Music Journal".*